

How Different Cultures Handle Conflict

How we handle conflict is highly influenced by our culture. Conflicts across cultures can be particularly tricky because of this. The more awareness we have of our own cultural assumptions, and the more flexibility we can bring to such situations, the more effective we can be in handling conflicts.

Some cultural differences that affect conflict resolution:

Expressing Strong Emotion

A. Strong feelings must be expressed *first* so negotiation can progress through calm, rational communication. Being objective and reasonable is associated with legitimacy.

B. Progress must be made in negotiation before enough trust is built so that participants can let go of intense expression of emotion. That emotion must be expressed, though, because strong feelings are associated with legitimacy of concern.

C. The norm throughout is calmness and rationality; participants are expected to repress their feelings which are regarded as illegitimate and counterproductive.

Trustworthiness of the Mediator

A. Impartiality is important, therefore someone who is a stranger to all parties is most likely to be trusted.

B. Caring and involvement are important, therefore someone familiar who is known and respected by all parties is most likely to be trusted.

Site of Mediation

A. The conflict should be separated from outside influences, therefore a neutral location is best.

B. Conflict resolution should take place in the context where the conflict occurs.

Getting to the Point

A. It is important not to beat around the bush; identify and discuss the key issues in a conflict quickly.

B. It is rude to name problems too quickly; better to spend some time in casual interaction first.

Issue Organization

A. Talk about one thing at a time.

B. Deal with several topics at once, or move quickly back and forth between issues.

Saving Face

A. Admitting that you have been wrong or backing down is unpleasant, yet appropriate in some circumstances.

B. Losing face is completely unacceptable or should be strongly avoided.

Structure of Session

A. Conflict resolution works best when the structure is formal. There should be clear roles, rules and demarcation of beginning, ending and the stages in between.

B. Conflict is best resolved in a climate of informality that resembles casual, social interaction.

Attribution of Fault

A. When someone defends themselves against an accusation, it is a sign of innocence; silence signifies guilt.

B. When someone defends themselves against an accusation, it shows they are guilty; to ignore an accusation is a sign of innocence.

Which statements do you tend to identify with? Which ones make less sense? How would you handle conflict with someone coming from that perspective? How can you communicate more clearly *how you* approach conflict?

based on "Cultural Differences in Mediation" from The Mediator's Handbook, by Jennifer Beer with Eileen Steif, Friends Conflict Resolution Programs, 1997. New Society Publishers (page 80 to 82).

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